

AT THE DAIRY

By Edible Monterey Bay

Goat Goddesses

Four local women bet their farms on the underappreciated goat

By Deborah Luhrman

Photography by Geneva Liimatta



“There was just too much testosterone in that room,” says Hollister rancher Lisa Knutson, recalling her first meeting with the Cattle- men’s Association. So she went home, sold her cattle and bought a herd of cashmere goats. The goats, which now number 127, roam grassy hillsides east of town, guarded from mountain lions by 12 enormous Anatolian dogs and moved from pasture to pasture by a pack of border collies that Knutson trained herself.

Goats are believed to be the world’s first domesticated animal and, globally, more goat meat and goat milk is consumed than any other kind, but here at home goats remain underappreciated. Knutson is one of four local “goatesses” who are discovering the joys of the *Capra hircus* as well as their tremendous versatility. In addition to milk and meat, artisanal goat products made here in the Monterey Bay Area include cheese, kefir, yogurt, soap, body lotion, face cream, milk bath, fleece and even paint.

With the exception of the reclusive Charlie Cascio of Sweetwater Farm in Big Sur, all of our local goat herders are female and there seems to be a certain something between women and their goats.

“There’s a femininity to goats, an air of grace that complements a woman,” says Dee Harley, who has been raising goats and making award-winning goat cheese in Pescadero for nearly 20 years. “High- strung racehorses often have a goat companion to keep them calm, and when I’m upset I

always go out to the goats to calm down,” she adds. “I love to watch their breath in the cold at night; it’s almost meditative and makes you feel fortunate to be there.”

Knutson says she likes goats because they are personable, sweet and easier to manage for a woman. “They want to be a companion and oh, my god!” she gushes, “nothing is cuter than a baby goat!”

The Rancher

Since starting her goat herd four years ago, Knutson has added 55 Merino sheep to her tribe. They roam alongside the cashmere goats and are shorn each spring.

At the bottom of the hill, she raises heritage chickens and gathers some 250 organic eggs a day, which she sells through the Live Earth Farm CSA, the Morgan Hill Farmers’ Market and Star Market in Salinas. She calls the farm Pasture Chick—not for the chickens—but “because it’s a girl’s ranch.” (see *EMB* Winter 2011)

“I’m a little oddity in this world,” she says, laughing. “I shave my legs, wear nail polish and tie the gate closed with a bow. We talk to the animals and we have meltdowns.”

Each goat produces only six ounces of precious cashmere, while one sheep gives enough wool to knit a sweater and a scarf. Although Knutson enjoys spinning and likes to knit, most of the fleece and wool is sent off to a small mill in Pennsylvania. Young male goats and sheep are processed at J&R Natural Meat and Sausage in Paso Robles and sold.

On top of all that, Knutson has been experimenting with milking goats. She now keeps a separate herd of nine French Alpine dairy goats and two bucks named Amidee and Casanova. She is trying to grow the herd to 50 does and has drawn up plans for a raw milk creamery to be built between her house and the barn by summer 2014.

Since she hasn’t been licensed yet, she currently feeds the milk to her chickens and to runts born to the cashmere goats, which are brought into the barn and bottle-fed.

She’s also working to perfect her cheesemaking skills and tries out fresh chèvre on foodie friends who act as taste testers. “I don’t want to be a legend in my own mind,” she jokes. Among those lucky taste testers is Chef Carlos Canada of Jesse Cool’s Flea St. Cafe in Menlo Park, who proclaimed her latest recipes “amazing.”

The Cheesemaker

Goat cheesemaker Dee Harley says she's always looking for something new "to keep the creativity going and not get stagnant." Her farm in Pescadero was full of activity on the chilly weekday morning I visited. In the barn, the herd of 192 American Alpine goats was being milked while llamas stood guard. Next door, visitors kept stopping by to sample a vast array of beautiful cheeses in the tasting room. And up in a hayloft dining room, pewter was being polished in preparation for an elegant farm-to-table dinner.

From an original herd of six goats, passed along to her by Nancy Gaffney of Bonny Doon's now defunct Sea Star Farms, Harley Farms has expanded far beyond farmstead cheese to become a mini-empire of goat-based products and back-to-the-land experiences.

Harley is originally from a small hamlet in Yorkshire in the north of England, and while traveling down the West Coast as a young woman, she happened to stop at the youth hostel at Pescadero's Pigeon Point. She fell in love with the area and ended up marrying Tim Duarte, who manages his family's landmark tavern there.

All of Harley's stories seem to have that same element of serendipity. She was pasturing Sea Stars' goats when Gaffney decided to go out of business. By 2009, demand for Harley's cheese had skyrocketed and the delicate, flower-decorated rounds were being shipped all over the country. Her herd had grown to 350 does, but that wasn't sustainable on the 9-acre farm, so she decided to downsize, cut back production and just sell locally.

That coincided with the growing locavore movement and Pescadero's popularity as a day-trip destination for people from the San Francisco Bay Area. So she started the tasting room and then farm tours. "Due to our location, the farm has become a huge destination just by responding to people's interests; it wasn't planned that way," she says. Currently seven full-time employees and 22 part-timers work as tour guides and clerks in the new mercantile shop that sells everything but the cheese. Exquisitely displayed wares include Harley Farm soaps and lotions, as well as imported goat fleece socks, soft blankets and a collection of stunning European farm tools.

Last year, Harley started hosting monthly farm-to-table lunches and dinners in the hayloft that go on for five hours. While not inexpensive, they are wildly popular and booked months in advance. This spring she is adding a series of classes on foraging for wild foods and cooking with herbs, led by local herbalist Suzanne Elliott.

But her most exciting new project may be a line of goat milk paint. It's a classic chalk and milk protein (casein) recipe that dairies have used forever to whitewash their barns. But pigment specialist Alex Warren of San Francisco's Sinopia has created seven pure, bold colors that look especially good on the walls of rustic buildings.

"The dinners and tours and now the paint are a kind of lateral expansion," Harley says. "It allows us to keep the farm small and alive, but we must never lose track of the fact that the goats are at the center of our circle."

The Milk Mama

Goats have always been at the center of family life for Lynn Selness, who runs a sweet goat dairy farmstead called Summer Meadows in the hills of Watsonville. "I got the first goat in Minnesota when I was pregnant with my first child, because I wanted her to be well nourished," she recalls. But seven children later, Lynn and her husband decided to move west with their offspring—and a Nubian named Nora.

Eventually they bought 23 acres and established a herd of 65 Nubian goats, milking about 20 of them each day by hand for two hours in the morning and one hour each evening. Fresh raw goat milk is delivered twice a week to 50 families who are shareholders in her herd. On the in-between days, products such as kefir, yogurt and chèvre are made for shareholders and for the Live Earth Farm CSA.

Selness tries to let her goats live as "naturally as they were intended to live," which means keeping kids and does together and letting older goats remain with the herd even after their milk production has declined. She feels it improves the taste and the healthfulness of the milk.

"Every time I touch one of them, there is such a connection," Selness says. She lays her head against the side of a doe when she milks and listens to its rumen rumbling, which is comforting to her but can also relay digestion issues in one of the goat's four stomachs.

"Goats trust in you, they want your comfort when they are in labor, they birth with you and then they give you nourishment," she says with a certain reverence. "Maybe it is something really special with women."

Her low-yielding herd is barely profitable and the work is formidable, but the milk is delicious and Selness keeps going because of her customers. "Raw goat's milk helps many people with health

issues,” she maintains. “Colicky babies are cured by the milk. Customers with autistic kids following the GAPS diet are finding that the milk helps dramatically, and a little girl named Clara who has Rett syndrome has been able to stay off a feeding tube because she gets enough nourishment from our milk.”

Selness’ youngest daughter, Meadow, is now 19 and a student at Cabrillo College. She takes care of the goats when her mother is away and seems to share her affinity for animals—a gift that makes her namesake farm such a special place.

The Homesteader

The story of how Jeannie Wholey got her goats belongs under the category of “if you can do it, I can do it.” While on vacation in Maine six years ago, she sat on the beach reading Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* along with Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. The books spoke to her, so she returned home to California and set about building her homestead.

“As a mom it was important to me that my daughter knows that milk and eggs don’t just come from Safeway,” says Wholey, who had been living in Los Altos Hills.

After searching up and down the Central Coast, Wholey and her husband found an affordable two-acre parcel in Bonny Doon with a rambling house and a slice of ocean views. They named their new farm Fish Princess—a reference to Wholey’s nickname, bestowed by her husband because of her love for surfcasting. Fish Princess started out with one Swiss Alpine goat but now has four: Hemmy, Periwinkle, Walle and Crazy Daisy.

“The first time I made cheese from their milk I nearly cried,” she recalls. “They are out there in yard eating blackberry brambles and poison oak and turning it into delicious milk and cheese for us. It’s like a miracle.”

Wholey suddenly found herself with more milk than she could use. It didn’t make sense to go through the licensing process to become a commercial dairy with just four goats, so she turned to making goat’s milk soaps.

She crafts each soap by hand in a tool shed that she shares with her husband’s beer-making equipment and wraps them in beautiful flowered tissue on her dining room table. The business really took off last summer and she now has a line of goat’s milk body lotions and 18 varieties of scented soaps—all made with a rich mixture of goat’s milk, locally produced olive oil from

Paicines in San Benito County, avocado oil, pomegranate oil and Shea butter. Shaving soaps and goat's milk bath sachets were introduced for Valentine's Day.

Fish Princess Farm is part of Santa Cruz Local Foods, a unique online CSA that sells eggs from her flock of heritage chickens and ducks, as well as items from other small-scale farms. Fish Princess wares can also be found in SLOWCOAST gift boxes of local, sustainably produced products. In summer, Wholey grows 300 tomato plants and provides produce to local restaurants like the Davenport Roadhouse and Gabriella Café.

Despite the romance of having a farm, all of our local women goatherds agree that it's hard work. "You've got to really want this type of life," Harley says. "You can't go away; you work seven days a week; and if the pump breaks, you need to go out and fix it." But they don't complain very much. They clearly adore their animals and their contentment suggests that once you get a goat, the goat may just get you.

Deborah Luhrman is a lifelong journalist who has reported from around the world. She returned home to the Santa Cruz Mountains a few years back and enjoys growing vegetables, but she hasn't gotten a goat, yet. She also edits *EMB's* electronic newsletter.

Additional reporting by Jamie Collins.

Explore

Spring is the perfect time to see adorable newborn baby goats on the farm—and get to know our local goat herders and their products.

Goat visits: Harley Farms, 205 North St., Pescadero. Cheese tasting and farm visits daily from 10am–5pm. Full tours available on weekends for \$20, reserve online. www.harleyfarms.com

Cheesemaking: Dee Harley says it's the sea air that makes her cheese especially delicious. For those who want to try making cheese at home, she recommends the online recipes from New England Cheesemaking Supply. www.cheesemaking.com

Raw goat's milk: Summer Meadows sells raw goat's milk through its goat herd shares, 831.786.8966. Claravale Farm in San Benito County sells it retail at the Downtown Santa Cruz

Farmers' Market on Wednesdays, New Leaf Community Markets, Shopper's Corner and Staff of Life in Santa Cruz.

Goat meat, fleece, roving and yarn: All this can be purchased from Lisa Knutson's Pasture Chick Ranch in Hollister, 831.801.9765. www.facebook.com/pasturechickranch

Goat's milk soaps and lotions: Fish Princess Farm's line can be purchased at Staff of Life, the Food Bin/Herb Room and Westside Farm & Feed in Santa Cruz, or online at www.etsy.com.

More reading: *City Goats: The Goat Justice League's Guide to Backyard Goat Keeping* by Jennie Palches Grant (Mountaineers Books, 2012), founder of the Goat Justice League. A primer chock full of guidance, resources, photos, (and even recipes) to tell you *every- thing* you need to know about keeping goats in your own backyard.